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ABSTRACT

A critique of the educational reform report, "A Nation At Risk" (1983), asserts that the recent American education reform movement is hindering true educational reform, because recommendations offered by this and other reports generally call for a redoubling of educational effort within the present educational context without advocating any essential changes in educational structure, content, or methodology. Through discussion of proposals concerning content, standards and expectations, time, teaching, and leadership and fiscal support, it is concluded that most reports have not proposed anything truly innovative in the way of educational curriculum or instructional methodology. Instead, most have recommended measures that would only reinforce the status quo. (Author/CB)

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AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL REFORM: IS THE CURE WORSE THAN THE DISEASE?

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AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL REFORM:

IS THE CURE WORSE THAN THE DISEASE?

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the major currents of the recent American educational reform movement. It performs this analysis through a critique of a paradigmatic report entitled A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform. This report was issued in 1983 by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The thesis of the writer of this paper is that the recent American educational reform movement is hindering, rather than helping, true educational reform because the recommendations offered by A Nation at Risk and subsequent reports generally call for a redoubling of educational effort within the present educational context without advocating any essential changes in educational structure, content, or methodology.

INTRODUCTION

Putting aside any sense of suspense, let me immediately make my position clear. I think that, in the case of recent American educational reform, the cure is indeed worse than the disease. Note that I do not deny there is a sickness in American education which needs to be remedied. Rather, what I want to say is that most recent recommendations for putting American education aright seem to me to be only recipes for aggravating the situation.

As a means of investigating the recent American educational reform movement, I have chosen to concentrate on the analysis and recommendations found in A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform. This report was published in April, 1983, by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. The Commission was appointed by United States Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell and consisted of eighteen members who represented such various educational constituencies as legislators, professors, college presidents, state and local educational administrators, etc. There was one teacher on the Commission.

A Nation at Risk has generally been considered to be precedential for the scores of major reports on American education which have been published since its issuance. Many of its recommendations have already been carried into practice (Weinraub, 1986). Having read most of the subsequent reports and having observed that they propose essentially the same diagnosis and remedy as A Nation at Risk, I believe that a concentration on

A Nation at Risk will provide a sufficient basis on which to elucidate and critique the approach to American educational reform that has been dominant for the past several years.

CRISIS MENTALITY

A Nation at Risk was written in apocalyptic tones. It opened with this warning:

> the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people....If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 5).

This sense of emergency has continued to characterize most of the succeeding American educational reform reports. One of the latest to be issued said:

> Public officials who propose budget reductions in education at a time when the republic is handicapped by the burden of an undereducated populace are unthinkingly abetting an act of national suicide.... The storm warnings are unmistakable: Our society is troubled, our economy endangered, our democratic values jeopardized, our international leadership threatened, our educational system embattled (National Commission on the Role and Future of State Colleges and Universities, 1986, pp. 2-3).

EDUCATIONAL GOALS

Returning to our consideration of A Nation at Risk, the

Commission made clear at the outset of its report that its concern about the deterioration of American education was focused, first of all, on economic and geopolitical realities. It was worried that, unless educational reform occurred, America would lose its privileged position in world trade and international affairs. Additionally, the Commission was concerned about the erosion of domestic equality of opportunity. It said:

> Part of what is at risk is the promise first made on this continent: All, regardless of race or class or economic status, are entitled to a fair chance and to the tools for developing their individual powers of mind and spirit to the utmost (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. 8).

Thus, the goals that seem to have driven the Commission's recommendations were dominance in the international sphere and equity at home. It may be wondered whether there is not some trace of paradox involved in attempting to pursue simultaneously the goals of dominance and equity. Yet, America has often been characterized as a nation which has been able to embrace both extremes of a contradiction at the same time.

The Commission grouped its recommendations under the headings of content, standards and expectations, time, teaching, and leadership and financial support. Each of these sets of recommendations will be considered in turn.

PROPOSALS CONCERNING CONTENT

The Commission recommended that all students be required to take courses in the "Five New Basics" in order to graduate from high school. This would entail the completion of four years of English, three years of Mathematics, three years of Science, three years of Social Studies, and one-half year of Computer Science. Additionally, for the college-bound, two years of Foreign Language were strongly recommended.

This recommendation seems to be predicated on a belief that Ivan Illich once characterized as a myth, namely: "that instruction produces learning...; that valuable learning is the result of attendance; [and] that the value of learning increases with the amount of input" (Illich, 1970, p. 56). Requiring a given number of years of exposure to a subject does not guarantee an achievement of competency in that subject. It may be a necessary condition for such competency, but it is not a sufficient one. The Commission did not make this important distinction in its report. Still, in response to the Commission's proposal, forty of the fifty states have enacted legislation increasing the number of required courses in English, Mathematics, Natural Science, and Social Science. California's requirement of four years of English, three years of Mathematics, two years of Natural Science, and two years of Social Science is typical (Johnson, 1985).

The "Five New Basics" which the Commission proposed sound very much like the old basics, with the exception that something called "Computer Science" has been added. At a conference in 1984, I asked Milton Goldberg, the Executive Director of the Commission, from whence this "Computer Science" recommendation had arisen. Was it suggested by one of the Commissioners, or by one of the staff, or perhaps by the testimony of one of the experts who had appeared before the Commission? No, he said, it came through none of these channels. Rather, the recommendation had emerged because of the frequent expression of the need for a knowledge of computers in today's society voiced by parents and other members of the public who appeared at the Commission's meetings. While I would tentatively agree with such a need, I would also have expected a much more substantial research basis for a recommendation that every high school graduate be required to spend one-half year devoted solely to the study of something called "Computer Science."

The Commission made clear what it meant by "Computer Science" when it said:

> The teaching of computer science in high school should equip graduates to: (a) understand the computer as an information, computation, and communication device; (b) use the computer in the study of the other Basics and for personal and work-related purposes; and (c) understand the world of

> computers, electronics, and related technologies (p. 26).

One might want to question not only whether the computer is best studied in the format of a concentrated one-half year course, but also - in light of the Commission's above-stated description - whether that study should in fact be termed "Computer Science" or rather something like "Computer Studies" (on this point, see the remarks of Kelly, 1985, pp. 161-163). About twenty states have enacted legislation or have proposals requiring that students be computer literate by the time they graduate from high school, or that they complete a specific computer course in either elementary or high school (Johnson, 1985).

PROPOSALS CONCERNING STANDARDS AND EXPECTATIONS

The Commission recommended that "schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous and measurable standards, and higher expectations for academic performance and student conduct, and that 4-year [sic] colleges and universities raise their requirements for admission" (p. 27). In connection with this recommendation, the Commission recommended a nationwide (but not Federal) system of standarized achievement tests, which "should be administered at major transition points from one level of schooling to another and particularly from college to work" (p. 28).

I have three problems with these recommendations. First, the Commission made the unqualified assumption that every one of the more than two thousand American four-year colleges and universities would have need to raise its admission standards. I think this assumption is clearly questionable. Second, under the Commission's recommendations for tighter admission standards, the policy of relative open access to public colleges and universities (by which anyone who meets a certain minimum academic standard is admitted, but is subject to dismissal if he or she does not achieve and maintain a certain grade point average) would be imperilled. Indeed, the implementation of this recommendation would place considerable barriers in the way of achieving the Commission's stated goal of equality of educational opportunity. Third, the Commission suggested that college admission should be granted largely on the basis of nationwide standardized test scores. This assumes, first of all, that the mission of all colleges and universities is essentially the same, and, secondly, that standardized test scores are better indicators of potential college success than are high school class ranks. I think both of these assumptions are mistaken.

PROPOSALS CONCERNING TIME

The Commission recommended that "significantly more time be devoted to learning the New Basics. Th. will require more effective use of the existing school day, a longer school day, or

a lengthened school year" (p. 29). The Commission went on to specifically recommend that local school districts and state legislatures strongly consider adopting seven-hour school days and 200-day to 220-day school years. Perhaps the most telling evaluation of the wisdom of this recommendation was that made by a New York youth just after A Nation at Risk was issued. When asked for his comment on the Commission's recommendations, the youth responded: "Young people already dislike school, and they are going to make us hate it more" (Credibility Gap, 1983, section 1, p. 18). That youth implicitly put his finger on the heart of what is wrong with the Commission's proposals, namely, the assumption that more is better and that quantity leads to quality.

PROPOSALS CONCERNING TEACHING

The Commission found that "Too many teachers are being drawn from the bottom quarter of graduating high school and college students" (p. 22) and hence recommended that "persons preparing to teach should be required to meet high educational standards" (p. 30). Recently published, validated research (Barger, Barger, & Rearden, 1985) has demonstrated that the Commission was in error in this finding. The reason for this error was that the Commission had extrapolated that, since most students in high school who indicated an interest in going into teaching had scored very low on nationwide standarized college aptitude tests,

most new teachers must be at the bottom of the academic barrel. Despite the fact that this finding was in error, subsequent reports and the popular press still continue to propagate the myth that new teachers are substandard. More than thirty states have enacted legislation specifying college courses that prospective teachers must complete, requiring proficiency examinations in basic skills and/or in subjects they plan to teach, or specifying under what conditions districts may hire non-certified personnel (Johnson, 1985).

The Commission also recommended that students preparing to teach should demonstrate competence in an academic discipline. This recommendation has led to the issuance of two reports which proposed that undergraduate teacher education programs should be entirely abolished and that teacher education should become an exclusively graduate enterprise (Holmes Group, 1986; Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, 1986). The thought behind these proposals is that students should first obtain a degree in an academic discipline and then proceed to the graduate or professional level to be educated for teaching. However, there is ample evidence that undergraduate teacher education programs continue to produce competent teachers. Also, it might be argued that being involved with teacher education at the same time that a student is involved with his or her major undergraduate studies is actually an asset rather than a liability.

The Commission also recommended that "Salaries for the teaching profession should be...performance-based" (p. 30). This advocacy of merit pay caused initial adverse reaction from the major American teachers' unions (The National Education Association and The American Federation of Teachers). They have recently begun to be somewhat more tolerant of this idea. Their major concerns center around what criteria will be used to determine who gets merit pay and who will do the evaluation for the award of merit pay.

PROPOSALS CONCERNING LEADERSHIP AND FISCAL SUPPORT

Under this heading the Commission recommended that educators and elected officials be held responsible for providing the leadership necessary for reform and that citizens provide the fiscal support needed to bring about this reform. While it might seem hard to quarrel with this recommendation, I would argue that the problem with it is that the Commission was not specific enough in suggesting what kind of changes in governance or fiscal structures were needed to bring about reform. It recommended that current structures and bodies should simply do better what they were already charged with doing.

CONCLUSION

A Nation at Risk is essentially a conservative document. None

of its major recommendations called for radical change. What it did call for was simply more time spent on the basics, more time in school, tougher (but not essentially different) academic standards, more years of teacher preparation, and more money.

To paraphrase the New York youth quoted earlier in this paper: if present school strategy and tactics are ineffective, simply recommending more of the same is likely to make things worse, not better. Yet, neither A Nation at Risk nor the plethora of reports which have followed in its wake have proposed anything truly innovative in the way of educational curriculum or instructional methodology. They have only recommended measures which would reinforce the status quo.

It has been said that one who criticizes should be prepared to offer a better alternative. I have suggested that doing nothing or simply doing "more of the same" is not likely to produce change. If a different educational "output" is sought, it seems that there are two possible choices: 1) the "input" to education could be changed (this would affect who is to be educated and how much education they are to be offered), or 2) the "processing" involved in education could be changed (this would affect what is done in teaching and learning, how it is done, and who does it). Because I value the principle of equality of educational opportunity, I would not like to see any

diminution of the present "input" to education. There does seem to me to be some hope in pursuing real change in the "processing" involved in education. Just how this alternative would be specified is beyond the scope of this paper. I believe it would involve the application of Deweyian philosophy and Piagetian psychology. But, as to the present course of "more of the same" in American educational reform, I continue to fear that this type of cure is worse than the disease.

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